

EDITOR'S NOTE

A GOOD MAN IN NEW YORK

It's not often I receive an invitation to breakfast with a novelist, let alone one I admire. Truth is, there are precious few I *do* admire—among the living, anyway. So, when a call came through saying William Boyd was on his way from England and did I want to meet him, my response was automatic: Yes.

William Boyd is the young (31) author of two serio-comic novels, *A Good Man in Africa* (1981) and *An Ice-Cream War* (1983), both published here by William Morrow & Co. to considerable critical acclaim. In fact, as chance (and a good publicity director) would have it, a review of *An Ice-Cream War* appeared in the *New York Times* the very morning of our meeting. Mr. Boyd, it said, has "an elastic voice that is capable not only of some very funny satire but also of seriousness and compassion."

The object of Boyd's satire is England and the English. Whether dealing with modern-day international relations (*Good Man*) or obscure events in the British East Africa of World War I (*Ice-Cream War*), the colonial mentality nurtured and cherished by Victoria, Kipling, and General Gordon comes in for a thorough roughing up. Conse-

quently, reviewers of Boyd have rushed to compare him to those two stalwart practitioners of British social humor, Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis. True, a new novelist could find himself in worse company; but does Boyd see *himself* as their heir apparent?

"The writers you really admire are the ones you try not to write like," explains Boyd. "It's very easy to slip into imitation, and so one must struggle to avoid it."

Is this a denial, then, of such influences? Not quite.

"What was it Henry James called the Dickens novel? A 'loose baggy monster'? The novel is an exceptional vehicle. You can pour so much into it; it can carry such a lot of freight."

So, presumably, Waugh and Amis are poured into the Boyd novel, leaving room to spare. Other possible ingredients?

"I'm terrifically fond of Dickens; he's very important. And of course I admire Conrad, but begrudgingly—yes, begrudgingly."

"Actually, I'm more involved with contemporary fiction, especially American. I enjoy Philip Roth and John Updike, and I've reviewed the last four or five Vonnegut books for the *Times* [of London]."

I pressed Boyd on the matter of reviewing, aware that for several years he has been writing for the *Times* as well as teaching English literature at St. Hilda's College, Ox-

wreckage they have left, he sees the arrogance and degeneracy that perverted their ambition. 'WV'

A MINOR APOCALYPSE

by Tadeusz Konwicki

translated by Richard Lourie

(Farrar, Strauss & Giroux; 236 pp.; \$16.50)

Kevin Ransom

"Here comes the end of the world. It's coming, it's drawing closer or rather, it's the end of my own world which has come creeping up on me. The end of my personal world. But before my universe collapses into rubble, disintegrates into atoms, explodes into the void, one last kilometer of my Golgotha awaits me, one last lap in this marathon, the last few rungs up or down the ladder that is without meaning." So begins the latest novel to be published in the United States by the contemporary Polish writer Tadeusz Konwicki, who has established a reputation in Europe and the U.S. as an author, screenwriter, and director. His previous book, *A Dreambook of Our Time*, was selected by Philip Roth for the Writers From the Other Europe series published by Penguin, and *A Minor Apocalypse* has already won the prestigious Mondello Prize in Italy. Its publication in the United States

is sure to add substantially to his acclaim.

The last steps of the novel's opening passage may be read, alternatively, as the journey of an ordinary man, of the creative artist, of a citizen of contemporary Poland, and of mankind. In each of these roles the narrator seeks an elusive and perhaps non-existent meaning to life. His story can be read both as realistic portrayal of the social, political, and economic chaos of present-day Poland and as an allegory of the moral chaos of humanity.

An old Polish writer living in Warsaw is visited, shortly after he wakes, by two friends who tell him that he has been chosen to commit public suicide by setting himself on fire at eight that night on the steps of Communist party headquarters as an act of political opposition to the regime. He is, they explain, famous enough for the action to gain attention. When he questions them more closely, one tells him that he has been obsessed with death. "You have prepared yourself, and us, for your death most carefully....It's at your side. All you have to do is reach out."

The narrator/hero of the novel is clearly Konwicki; other characters are almost certainly representations of real people, objects of Konwicki's satire. The literary device of author as narrator as character is effective in inducing both a close subjectivity and a sense of reality of the setting. Konwicki is obviously interested in the duality of life as

art and art as life.

The narrator, who has not written anything for several years, decides that his last day on earth will be his "testament," a lived book that will sum up his beliefs about life. Although he tells himself that he does not have to go through with the suicide, he is still too nervous about the idea to stay in his small apartment, and he leaves to have breakfast at a favorite spot. During his epic one-day journey through the streets of Warsaw he encounters friends, old loves, and functionaries of the regime. Absurd characters abound: a high-level bureaucrat who takes off his clothes during a speech, and a young, would-be writer from the provinces who follows the narrator through the day, quoting from the old man's earlier works.

Space and time often verge upon the unreal. The "day" stretches beyond normal conception, seasons jump back and forth. Individual events are presented as separate rooms that the narrator enters and then leaves. And one detects surrealistic echoes of Dante's visit to hell, as the narrator carries his can of gasoline from a movie theatre, to a hospital without staff, to a decaying building.

With satire, irony, and self-mockery Konwicki contrasts the ordinary, even the mediocre, with the idea of a larger purpose. And though he satirizes the Communist government, he does not spare the current

ford. Would he continue with these activities together with his fiction?

"No, I'm giving up reviewing to spend all my time on fiction. And I'm leaving Oxford at the end of the term. I'm a fairly steady writer and can see myself putting out a book every two or two-and-a-half years. I'm also interested in working on film and television scripts as well."

Boyd is more than merely "interested" in film work. He is one of several young authors invited to provide scripts for a new British television station that is not unlike our own PBS network.

"There is good opportunity in England to do serious television work—something one needn't be ashamed of." Boyd's submission, which probably will be aired in England later this year and might eventually make its way to our own Sunday-evening Masterpiece Theatre series, follows the lives of three students through public school and ten years beyond. When I suggested to Boyd that the idea has already received some play (for instance, the recently aired "To Serve Them All My Days"), he was quick to respond.

"Americans have been fed a lot of nonsense about the English public school system. Either they're viewed through rose-colored glasses as a kind of pastoral existence, or they're portrayed as the setting for delicate homosexual relationships—the older boy trying to help his friend get

on the cricket team, that sort of thing. It's terribly inaccurate. I'm a product of the public school system, and I can tell you they are very different from what you've been shown."

And what of Boyd's next novel, due, he says, in September of '84?

"I'm returning to the more overtly comic tones of the first book, *Good Man in Africa*, but this time the setting will be the United States. I enjoy taking an Englishman, together with all his English trappings, and dropping him into an unfamiliar culture. The action will move between Manhattan and some small Southern town, where my central character will live.

Boyd, the Oxford don, writing about a small Southern town?

"After leaving New York, Susan [his wife] and I are going to drive around the South for a few weeks, stopping off at Charleston and, ultimately, New Orleans. We're very excited about the idea. We love New York—this is our third visit—but I'm anxious to see more of this country."

And we in this country, I assured him, are anxious to read more William Boyd. Fortunately, it appears we will be able to do so for quite a while to come.

—J.T.

generation, especially artists, for their lack of commitment. Finally, the narrator says on taking leave of a friend, "Goodbye, Hope. If freedom doesn't come after me as sudden and surprising as the beginning of summer, then it will come after one of the next poets, workers, students." Like Konwicki, we will all have to wait to see if this proves true.

THE WANDERING UNICORN
by Manuel Mujica Láinez
translated by Mary Fitton

(Taplinger Publishing Company; 322 pp.; \$16.95)

John E. Becker

This is a book with nobody in it—except, perhaps, its gossipy narrator. She/he is a medieval faery with a blue-and-white tail, bat-wings, and prominent bare breasts. She was once a lady, Melusine, human enough to inaugurate a lordly line of Lusignan knights. She must live forever. Out of love for Aiol, a handsome young bastard several generations down the line, she sojourns for the major part of the tale in the handsome male body of a young knight, Melusin. She sojourns unhappily, having begged her body from her faery mother out of lust for Aiol, but having neglected to specify its sex. Aiol, the wandering unicorn of the title, wanders

over the map of France and then over the map of the Holy Land.

The book jacket calls this an allegory of love. So does its faery narrator, well toward the end, when it is time to tell the dogged reader what all of this has been about. But Jorge Luis Borges in his introduction suggests Ariosto, which in turn suggests the whole pyrotechnic panorama of medieval and Renaissance romance. Yet those books were somehow peopled. One felt the passion and the madness of their characters as the anchoring reality behind their wild proliferations of landscapes, monsters, and costumery. Here, by the time the faery narrator gets around to telling us that this is an allegory of love, we find that we have been following him/her around for about three hundred pages and have no way of understanding how Aiol could be either the subject or object of love. He is a name, a costume, and a gesture or two, as inarticulate withal as one of D. H. Lawrence's coalminers. It is actually a shock, whether we have read the book jacket in advance or not, to find out at this point that we have been reading an allegory of love.

Perhaps the book is meant to evoke medieval tapestry with its superabundance of formally arranged detail. But there is more of the encyclopedic quality of the medieval mind here. This is an unending recital of names—noble names of knights and ladies of many countries, perhaps historical, per-

haps not. It is similarly a recital of the names of places, some recognizable, some recondite, some perhaps fictional. One feels, as he traces his way through this maze of names without people attached, names without places evoked, that he should know more, that he should find a history book somewhere, of medieval France, of the crusaders' Holy Land, and then, perhaps, the book would be more meaningful.

Soon, however, the imagination revolts. One remembers too many stories full of exotic names that yet carried their full burden of drama and believable place. At this point a suspicion arises. Perhaps the names are a kind of screen, a defense; perhaps they are actually a refusal to engage in dialogue or drama. For one thing, the abruptness of climactic events is disconcerting. It is not that they happen without warning. Rather, when they happen they happen in simple declarative statements, and are quickly gone by. Even moments of high ritual, processions, exotic banquets, are only lists.

Manuel Mujica Láinez lives in Argentina, and there is no reason we should expect all Latin American writers to write about Latin America's past, present, or future history. Yet this book is so distant from its own subject of medieval Europe, so obviously disengaged from its own narrative, that one feels the author's distance as profoundly disconcerting. Not only has he chosen not to engage the realities of his own